

Sport Matters Project: Para Fencing

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Introduction

Wheelchair fencing, also known as para fencing is the Paralympic sport where fencers participate in the sport from a seated position due to physical disabilities. My choice is informed by a dual purpose: academic exploration and professional development. As a fencer myself, I have a foundational understanding of the sport's culture, but I have had no exposure to the para fencing event and population. In that sense, para-fencing represents a genuinely unfamiliar population to me, even if the sport's framework is not. I was fortunate enough to be given an opportunity to both observe a tournament as well as try wheelchair fencing myself. Through my experiences I learned that there are some of the same sociological issues as able-bodied fencing, some that are less profound, and some that are more profound.

My motivation for this choice extends beyond the classroom. I am building a career in the fencing community, and I recognize a significant gap in my own competency when it comes to working with athletes with disabilities. I lack confidence in how to communicate respectfully and inclusively with this population, and I believe that gap could limit my ability to serve future clients. This project offers a structured opportunity to confront that discomfort directly. By engaging seriously with the lived experiences, challenges, and culture of para-fencers, I hope to develop not only sociological insight but also the awareness and language needed to be a more thoughtful and effective professional.

Background

Para fencing was first introduced by the “Father” of the Paralympics, Sir Ludwig Guttman, who saw the therapeutic benefits for spinal cord injury patients. Originally called, wheelchair fencing, it first appeared in the International Stoke Mandeville Games, the forerunner of the Paralympics, in 1954. Guttman had been a fencer at Heidelberg University in Germany as

a student. By 1965, wheelchair fencing had incorporated events for all three weapons for men: sabre, epee, and foil (World Para Fencing, nd.b). Interestingly, while able-bodied fencing only allowed women to fence foil until the 1996 Olympic Games (epee) and 2004 Olympic Games (sabre) (USOPM, 2026), wheelchair fencing added women's epee to the 1988 Paralympic Games and women's sabre to the 2020 Paralympic Games (World Para Fencing, nd.b). Ellen Geddes is the most famous American wheelchair being a two-time Paralympian and five-time World Championship team member (USOPM, 2026). As far as competitive opportunities, tournaments are not well-attended in the United States, so much of the American wheelchair fencing community travels to international competitions throughout the season. I attended the largest domestic event, which is the April North American Cup (NAC) where most events had ten or fewer entries, with the most having 15 entries. Because the event was part of an able-bodied NAC, there were a few dozen spectators who stopped by the "para pod" to watch the event. My immersive experience was practicing with Victoria ("Tori") Isaacson, a 2024 Paris Paralympian at her home club in Poughkeepsie, New York. After the practice, I was able to interview her as well as her coach Eric Soyka, who is also the National para fencing coach.

Wheelchair fencing uses a classification system like all other Paralympic sports. In wheelchair fencing, the classifications are divided into A, B, and C and are differentiated by impairment of trunk control and the fencing arm. Fencers must also have an impairment in one of seven eligible groups: impaired muscle power, athetosis, impaired passive range of movement, hypertonia, limb deficiency, ataxia, or leg length difference (World Para Fencing, nd.b.). Fencers must go through a four-part evaluation process to be classified. The paperwork includes medical records and imaging to establish whether they have a disability in one of the qualifying categories. If this is approved, then they must go through an in-person examination at a

competition venue of their dorsal muscle extension, lateral balance, and trunk control while seated. Finally, the panel assigns a classification based on their level of impairment. If the fencer disagrees with their classification, they can submit a protest form.

Ability

The most obvious sociological lens to use on wheelchair fencing is ability-status. Para-athletes, like able-bodied athletes, have strong athletic identities which can predict athletic results (Guerrero & Martin, 2018). I observed that Tori seemed to identify strongly with both a general athletic identity and her identity as a para-fencer. For example, she was wearing a t-shirt with the phrase “Sorry I can lift more than you,” indicating that athletic prowess is an important identity factor for her. However, as Coakley (2021) expresses, disability sport exists in the broader social hierarchy that positions able-bodied sport as the “normal” benchmark. During my observation and discussion, I got the sense that the para fencing community views themselves as another modality rather than as a subordinate type of fencing. However, I think the able-bodied fencing community largely “other”-izes para fencing as a completely separate sport. USA Fencing governs both able-bodied and para fencing in the United States, which goes a long way towards integrating both sides of the sport. For example, USA Fencing uses the same format and frequency on social media to post results and announcements for both modalities and seems to avoid objectifying wheelchair athletes.

Classification is a huge part of disability sport and can be a source of tension for the athletes. In the para fencing classification system, like other Paralympic sports, the athlete has to be disabled “enough” to participate. If their condition changes, this may mean a change in classification which could place them at advantage or disadvantage against their competitors. Additionally, similar to gender-testing in female athletes, the classification process is invasive

and has an inherent risk of personal data safety. Able-bodied athletes do not have to prove they are fit enough to participate, but athletes with a disability have to prove how “unfit” they are to participate in an able-bodied mode. This process likely enhances identification as a “para” fencer because the process separates them from able-bodied fencing. Alternatively, Coakley (2021) argues that athletes are active agents of social forces, and the wheelchair fencers, like Tori, actively challenge limiting narratives about disability and athletic capacity.

Age & Gender

Views on age and gender in wheelchair fencing seem to diverge from the general Western views on sport. Where the sport ideal typically values young athletes who maintain gender binary norms (Coakley, 2021), wheelchair fencing seems to be more accepting as a community. When asked about these sociological factors in our interview, Eric and Tori expressed that the lack of opportunities in disability sport fosters a more welcoming environment because the community prioritizes gaining more members. I also wondered if disabilities could serve as an equalizer because para fencing does not subdivide competitive categories by age like able-bodied fencing. Recovery from injury and illness seems to set para fencers apart more than age because recovery times may differ based on the disability. One promising aspect is that para fencing challenges Coakley’s (2021) observation that mainstream sport culture is structured around youth and young bodies and discards athletes as they age. Wheelchair fencing welcomes and possibly retains older athletes for whom disability may be the entry rather than the exit from the sport.

When asked about sexism in the sport, they both agreed that culture does not feel sexist. The gender gap in prize money, sponsorship and media coverage is compressed by the resource pool more so than the fact that equity has been achieved. However, using Coakley’s (2021) framework, women still have compounded marginalization by being both a woman and having a

disability. The intersectionality of gender and disability means that female-identifying para fencers may have to navigate expectations about both disability and femininity, which may be difficult for fencers who already struggle with social recognition.

Media & Financial Resources

While USA Fencing is equitable in their media coverage of para fencing, mainstream media rarely covers para fencing. Able-bodied fencing does not have mass appeal as it is difficult to understand the structure, scoring, and tactics; and the athletes' personal identities are hidden by a mask. These factors along with the general lack of coverage means that para fencing is virtually invisible outside of the fencing community. As Coakley (2021) posits in the textbook, media coverage and financial resources have a direct relationship. Tori shared that she (and other para fencers) only receives small stipends to cover travel to competitions; otherwise, she pays for everything privately. Some para fencers have sponsors, but the sources are limited. Travel is made more expensive by the need for a spouse or support person to assist the athlete while traveling based on their care needs. This view of sport may be less appealing for sponsors who want to show people who are independent and invincible. Ironically, the media can create more “appealing” stories for these athletes but would not be motivated to do so based on the lack of ready audience.

Ethical Standard #4: Human Differences

The AASP Ethical Standard Four (AASP, 2024) requires that CMPCs educate themselves, recognize, and not discriminate against individuals with cultural differences. While I agree that this is a baseline competence, I think we, as practitioners, need to go further in upholding that principle by taking action. However, action does not mean inserting ourselves into a specific context because that can be intrusive. I look at this as “active education” where I first

do my own research on the wheelchair fencing community and then take more opportunities to participate in training and events. This could look like volunteering at the next para fencing tournament closes to me, as there is a significant amount of set up involved to run the event. I also have a nice opening to work with para fencers during my mentorship period as I provide my service for free during this time, and those athletes may have less access to mental performance support.

My experience

This experience was valuable for me as both a practitioner and a human precisely because it made me uncomfortable. When we were preparing to fence, Tori belted me into the chair and then left me to “practice” moving my torso back and forth while she was getting dressed to fence. I felt vulnerable sitting there and, honestly, a bit embarrassed. I’m not sure if I was worried people would think I had a disability or just worried that I looked incompetent. This speaks to the inherent bias I have about ability. While as practitioners we try to take a biopsychosocial approach to practice, I think we tend to default still to the medical model of disability, where it is viewed as a problem to be solved. This deficit model means disability is automatically and generally viewed negatively. It was disappointing that I defaulted to that negative view. On a positive note, upon reflection, wheelchair fencing highlights the possibilities of the biopsychosocial model because the fencing still felt very similar, I just happened to be sitting down. Therefore, the issue would be the accessibility of the wheelchair and the frame not the disability.

The sensation of being trapped by the belt was eye-opening in the sense that I learned what could feel like for someone with an acquired disability to all-of-a-sudden be confined to a chair. Able-bodied fencing is highly dependent upon footwork, so I had to adjust to using my

torso to control the distance between my opponent and I. For me, as a practitioner, empathy is one of the major tenants of my professional philosophy, so I think this was a really important experience for me if I'm going to work effectively with athletes with a disability. Although one experience is certainly not enough to gain a full perspective, I think it gave me both perspective on how it may feel to both participate in the sport and how athletes who participate are perceived. Wheelchair fencing both replicates and disrupts the sociological patterns of mainstream sport. While ability status is the main structuring aspect, the community rejects normative views on age and sex, while still suffering from invisibility in the media sector. This project reinforced the importance of multicultural competence when working with clients and that working with an unfamiliar population requires direct engagement not just academic research.

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